



Spinster Tales

A Closer Look at American Gothic and Its Circumstances

Bradford R. Collins

*I endeavored to paint these people as they existed for me in the life I knew. It seems to me that they are basically solid and good people. But I don't feel that one gets at this fact better by denying their faults and fanaticism.*¹

—Grant Wood

For almost a century, art historians and critics have been unable to produce a broadly persuasive interpretation of Grant Wood's iconic painting *American Gothic* (frontispiece). As a result of the long-standing irresolution about facets of the work, the wealth of different interpretations, and the embrace of poststructuralist literary theories by the American academy, commentators have lately adopted a happily resigned attitude on what they agree is the fertile ambiguity of the work.² In the lead catalog essay for *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*, the artist's 2018 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the curator Barbara Haskell concluded, "The painting clearly contained a story, but one so enigmatic that it defied ready explanation; its very inscrutability invited boundless interpretations."³ Haskell's conclusions were echoed by the critics who found the painting ambiguous and repeated the refrain that Wood was uncertain about both his intentions and his characters.⁴ A nice summary of the critical and art historical consensus was provided by the cultural historian Geoffrey O'Brien in his review of the exhibition. He describes Wood as "evasive," his motives "inscrutable," and the painting of "the unsmiling Iowan with the pitchfork (farmer? townsman?) and his aproned companion (wife? daughter?)"—now "laden with unfathomable accretions of association"—ultimately "mysterious."⁵

Rather than being evasive or uncertain, Wood was from the outset very consistent in his remarks about the subjects of his work. If he expressed ambiguity about his protagonists, it reflected the complexity, not the uncertainty, of his views. Through a nexus of subtly conceived clues, Wood narrates the story of a relatively young, unmarried woman unhappily facing a bleak future of sexual repression administered by a patriarchal religious culture. The primary documents, particularly remarks made by Wood and his sister about the painting, support this conclusion. What emerges is a new understanding of the painting as a carefully crafted exercise in pictorial story telling.

This interpretation also opens vistas on the question of the painting's broader contextual implications, revealing the two larger stories it intersects. The first is the

Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930. Oil on beaver board, 30¾ × 25¾ in. The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection, 1930.934. © VAGA at ARS, New York

cultural narrative of the fight of American bohemians and their allies against prevailing conservative standards, values, and assumptions, which fully emerged during the 1920s and is reflected particularly in the literature centered on the frustrated lives of single women in small towns. The other story, hinted at in this painting, concerns Wood himself. In the light of the acknowledgment among historians that Wood was homosexual, his sympathetic treatment of the repressed spinster suggests she may represent an alter ego, a fellow victim of narrow religious and social values.

The Story of American Gothic

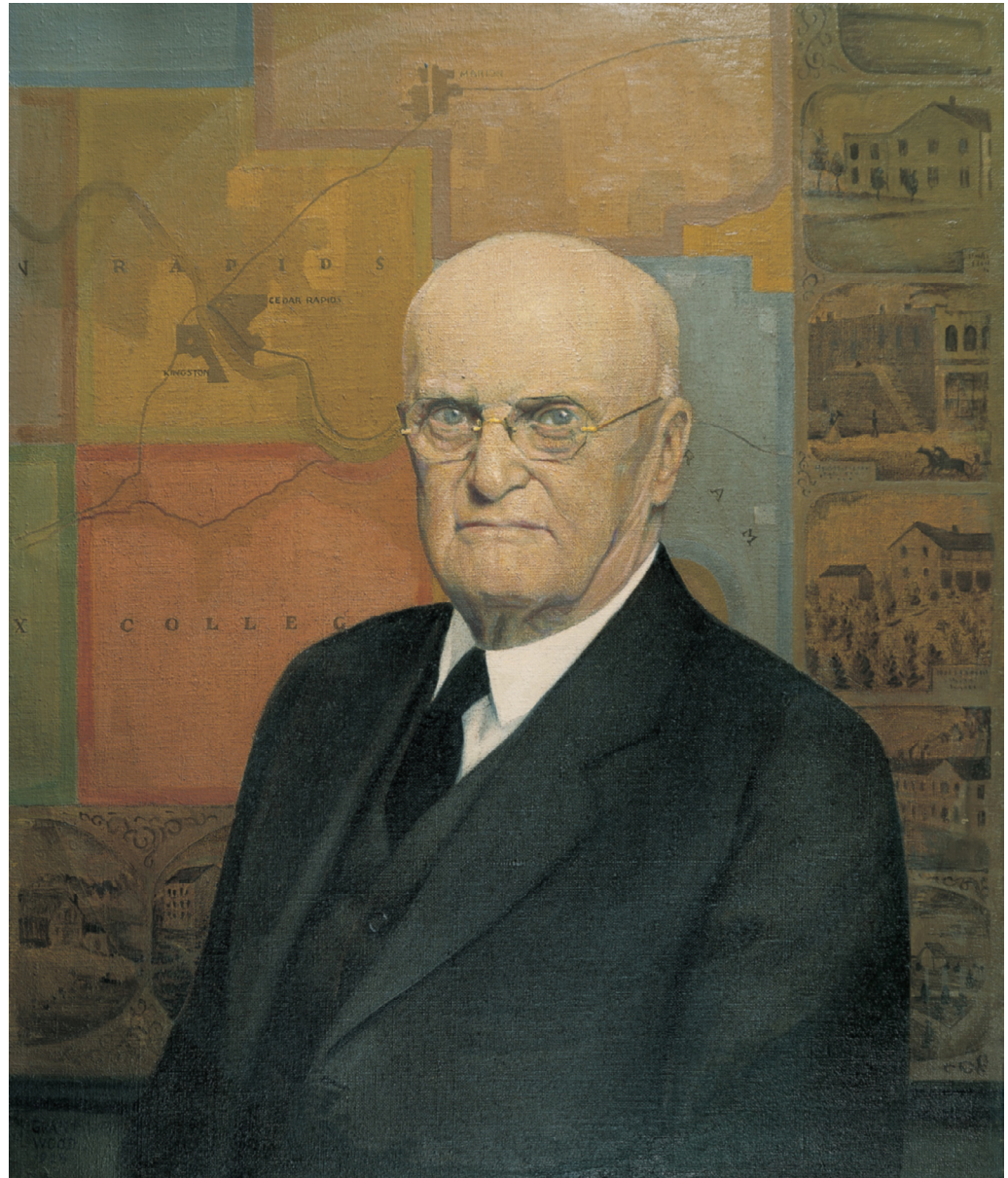
According to Wood, “the story” of his “discovery” of Iowa subjects like *American Gothic* “begins with [H. L.] Mencken,” the leading critic of the middle-American “booboisie” in the years between the two world wars: “Every week in *The Smart Set* [1914–23] and later in *The American Mercury* [1924–33], good old Mencken belabored my people as ‘corn-fed boobs and peasants’—and I ate it up.”⁶ Convinced the Midwest was “inhibited and barren,” Wood made extended trips to France on three occasions between 1920 and 1926, where he pursued a bohemian way of life and painted charming townscapes in a loose, painterly manner inspired by Impressionism.⁷ At the end of his final visit, on the heels of a disappointing Paris exhibition, he experienced an epiphany that would determine his future direction.⁸ The moment is recorded in the memoir of his friend and former Iowa neighbor, the historian William L. Shirer. Having shared several carafes of wine at a café, the usually reticent Wood became garrulous:

*“Everything that I’ve done up to now was wrong,” he said. . . . “All these years wasted because I thought you couldn’t get started as a painter unless you went to Paris and studied, and painted like a Frenchman. I used to go back to Iowa and think how ugly it all was. Nothing to paint. . . . Listen, Bill. I think . . . at last . . . I’ve learned something. At least, about myself. Damn it. . . I think you’ve got to paint . . . like you have to write . . . what you know. And despite the years in Europe, here and in Munich and the other places, all I really know is home. Iowa. The farm at Anamosa. Milking cows. Cedar Rapids. The typical small town, alright. Everything commonplace. Your neighbors, the quiet streets, the clapboard homes, the drab clothes, the dried-up lives, the hypocritical talk, the silly boosters, the poverty of. . . damn it culture. . . . I’m going home for good,” he said. “And I’m going to paint those damn cows and barns and barnyards and cornfields and little red schoolhouses and all those pinched faces and the women in their aprons and the men in their overalls and store suits”. . . . He hesitated a moment. “Damn it, isn’t that what Sinclair Lewis has done in his writing—in *Main Street* [1920] and *Babbitt* [1922]? Damn it, you can do it in painting, too!”⁹*

Lewis’s example was not Wood’s only literary inspiration. In her pioneering scholarship for the 1983 Wood retrospective organized by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the art historian Wanda Corn insisted other Midwestern writers, particularly his fellow Iowans Jay Sigmund and Ruth Suckow, provided critical encouragement during the 1920s.¹⁰ Wood may have been using Lewis’s name as a shorthand to reference the role of contemporary writing as a whole in his decision to shift his allegiance from the Impressionist landscape tradition to the subjects of ordinary life, but his comments to Shirer indicate that in 1926 his attitude to the people and manners of Iowa was more in line with the critical one taken by Lewis than the affectionate approach of Sigmund and Suckow.

The results of his decision to follow Lewis’s example were not immediately apparent. Although Wood did paint barns and cornfields after his return home in 1926, the

- 1 Grant Wood, *Portrait of John B. Turner, Pioneer*, 1928 and 1930. Oil on canvas, 30 ¼ × 25 ½ in. Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Gift of Harriet Y. and John B. Turner II, 76.2.2. © Figge Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



paintings were little different from those he had been producing for years, both at home and abroad, in his “impressionistic” style. The shift to his mature approach was the result of a combination of factors. In 1927 and 1928 he spent part of the summer at Sigmund’s house in Waubeek, Iowa, where in addition to depicting local scenery, he listened to his friend berate him for his continued devotion to a French aesthetic.¹¹ The opportunity to change his approach was provided by a commission to paint the father of his patron, the funeral-home owner David Turner. *Portrait of John B. Turner, Pioneer* (fig. 1) depicts the crusty eighty-four-year-old Cedar Rapids retired businessman against a vintage 1869 map of the city and the surrounding county, to which Turner had moved in 1880.¹² Wood’s addition of the descriptor “Pioneer” indicates he was painting more than an individual; he was celebrating the kind of man responsible for “settling” Iowa—the type of tough, direct, and serious man a challenging place like that required. The work was finished in 1928 but reworked, reframed, and redated



2 Grant Wood, *Woman with Plants*, 1929. Oil on upson board, 20 ½ × 17 ⅞ in. Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, 31.1. © Figge Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

3 Unidentified artist, *Persephone*, early 20th century. Cameo brooch, gold, brass, jasper, and alabaster, 1 ½ × 1 ¼ in. Courtesy of the Figge Art Museum, City of Davenport Art Collection, Grant Wood Archive, Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, 1965.110



in 1930 after Wood took a business trip to Munich and encountered the paintings of the so-called Flemish and German Primitives, including Hans Memling and Albrecht Dürer, in the Alte Pinakothek, which he frequently claimed as the stylistic turning point in his career.¹³

Before reworking the Turner portrait, Wood painted a second one in this formal and conceptual vein, *Woman with Plants* (fig. 2). The painting depicts his sixty-one-year-old mother, Hattie, half-length, seated and holding a houseplant in her lap before a lovely fall farm scene. Wood asked his mother to wear her old-fashioned apron trimmed with rickrack over a simple black dress.¹⁴ Presumably, he also instructed her to wear the neoclassical brooch (fig. 3) that he had bought for her in Europe because the woman depicted in the cameo reminded him of his sister, Nan Wood Graham.¹⁵ Although not readable in the painting, the woman is Persephone, identifiable by the pomegranates in her hair. Persephone's mother is Demeter, goddess of the harvest, whose chief emblem is a sheaf of wheat. That Hattie stands in front of a wheat harvest scene suggests that privately, and quite consciously, Wood was using the family chain of associations surrounding the cameo to elevate his own much-loved mother to the status of the Midwest's favorite goddess.¹⁶ A less lofty public statement of respect was made via the plant Hattie tenderly holds in her timeworn hands. Of all the decorative houseplants, the Sansevieria, or snake plant, is the toughest, able to survive abuse, neglect, and the most unsuitable growing conditions. It is the perfect metaphor for the woman herself, who endured a life of hardship with what Shirer called "grace and dignity."¹⁷ As his generic title indicates, Wood's depiction of his mother is another celebration of the durable breed characteristic of the region.

- 4 Grant Wood, *Sketch for American Gothic*, 1930. Pencil on paper, 4¾ × 3½ in. Private Collection. © Figge Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Following an idealized townscape, *Stone City, Iowa* (1930, Joslyn Art Museum), and a commemorative portrait of his studio assistant Arnold Pyle, *Arnold Comes of Age* (1930, Sheldon Museum of Art), Wood returned to the theme of Victorian-era relics in *American Gothic*. On a visit to Eldon, Iowa, in August of 1930, Wood saw a late nineteenth-century Carpenter Gothic house that inspired him to imagine the kind of people who might live there. He made a loose oil study of the dwelling and a quick preliminary pencil sketch of his idea for the work on the back of an envelope (fig. 4). Inspired by “tintypes from my old family album,” Wood invented a dour-faced husband and wife whom he set in front of the house. Back home he began searching for two “severely straight-laced characters. . . among the folks I knew [to

serve as models] . . . but could find none among the farmers—for the cottage was to be a farmer's home.”¹⁸ For the female, he settled on his thirty-year-old sister, Nan Graham, who recalled: “He told me to slick down my hair and part it in the middle and asked me to make an apron trimmed with rickrack, a trim that was out of style and unavailable in the stores. I ripped some off of Mother's old dresses. . . . He [also] asked me to wear Mother's cameo.” In another account, she added that the dress, too, belonged to her mother.¹⁹ “The next job,” Wood later reported, “was to find a man to represent the husband.” He chose his sixty-two-year-old dentist, whom he dressed in an old-fashioned collarless shirt, bib overalls, and a dark jacket.²⁰

Graham believed the female model he originally had in mind was a local spinster: “Dried up, dreary, and drab, she would have been ideal for *American Gothic*.”²¹ The claim raises the question of when and why Wood decided to rethink the identities of his pair. Whether it was the thirty-two-year age difference between his models, the spinster he had been considering, or some combination of these and other factors is impossible to say, but in the end the farm couple became a father and his spinster daughter living in town. Although it has become a generally accepted fact among writers on Wood that he vacillated on both the question of where the pair lived and their relationship, the assertion is simply untrue. The idea originated in the apparent contradiction between his oft-repeated claim that the couple was a townsman and his daughter and his 1933 description, cited above, of his search for models for what was “*was [going] to be a farmer's home*” and “a man to represent the husband” (emphasis added). But these remarks only describe his initial process; they show only what he had at the outset *intended* to paint, not what he ended up painting.²² On that subject, Wood was perfectly consistent. The earliest and most complete statements on the matter were made by Wood and his sister in the Des Moines *Sunday Register's Open Forum* in December 1930, in response to the popular assumption the painting depicted a farmer and his wife. In his interview with a reporter, Wood said, “The people in ‘American Gothic’ are not farmers but are small-town, as the shirt on the man indicates.” His sister wrote a letter in which she elaborated on the issue at some length. After explaining how Grant came to make the painting, she added:

I am not supposed to be the gentleman's wife, but his daughter. . . . papa keeps a feed store—or runs the village post-office, or perhaps he preaches in the little church. . . . Anyhow, he is a religious person. When he comes home in the evening, our Jersey cow out in the barn starts to moo, and so father takes off his white collar, pulls on overalls and an old coat, and goes out to hay the cow. . . .

*I am supposed to be one of those terribly nice and proper girls who get their chief joy in life out of going to Christian Endeavor and frowning horribly at the young couples in back seats if they giggle or whisper.*²³

In the following years Wood often echoed her description. In March 1931, for example, Wood told a high school audience the man is “a small-town professional man—a druggist, a post master or even a preacher.”²⁴ His most complete statement on the matter was made in a letter to an admiring fan, Nellie Sudduth, in 1941: “Papa runs the local bank or perhaps the lumber yard. He is prominent in the church and possibly preaches occasionally. . . . The prim lady with him is his grown-up daughter.”²⁵

Establishing the working identities of the pair was for Wood, as it is for us, only the first step. A close examination of the changes and additions made between the initial sketch and the painting reveals how carefully he worked not simply to establish those identities but to take the work beyond caricature into what he called “story-telling.”²⁶ That the two live in town is suggested by the combination of the church steeple behind the trees on the left and the man’s shirt—an expensive one with gold collar stud and tailored pleats appropriate to a banker, postmaster, or store owner just home from work and now collarless on his way to perform the evening chores. The other facets of their identities were established in more complex fashion, through the logic of the way the various new elements, including the church steeple, fit together to suggest a father-daughter story, not one of husband and wife. In his sketch, the farmers are a matched pair standing in closed rank against the world. Over the next two months they and their relationship changed significantly, if subtly. The man became not simply an older, fuller version of the dour-faced original but a more fearsome one, as well, as a result of the dangerous-looking pitchfork he now holds in place of the rake. The young woman is no longer his near equal but his deferential companion, more behind than next to him, an effect accentuated by the direction of her gaze. Instead of confronting us, she now looks off into the distance with a troubled look in her eyes. The intensity of her focus and the slight tightening of her brow suggest distress. While her mouth, too, is firm, it reads as sad rather than hard. He is not happy, but she is unhappy. To say she might be “holding back tears,” as the art critic Deborah Solomon recently concluded, may not be an overstatement.²⁷ That she is not his wife but his maiden daughter is suggested by the way Wood handled her sexuality. As Corn perceptively observed, “To point out her repressed sexuality and unfulfilled womanhood, the artist flattened her bosom and decorated her apron with a kind of miniature breast-hieroglyph, a circle-and-dot motif.”²⁸ By making the issue of her sexuality a two-dimensional abstraction, Wood effectively foreclosed its very possibility.

Wood dressed his subject in old-fashioned clothing to make it clear she is not a modern example of this female class but, like her house, a vestige from the previous era. Like the woman in *Victorian Survival* (fig. 5), painted the next year and inspired by Wood’s two maiden aunts, she, too, is a Victorian spinster.²⁹ According to Nina Auerbach, an expert on nineteenth-century British literature and culture,

*Victorian spinsters were defined by what they could not have. Work and love . . . were forbidden or allowed only second hand. For the respectable middle-class women who lived out the stereotype of the old maid, allowable work was limited to ill-paid dithering around the fringes of the service professions, while love meant meeting uncomplainingly the demands of aging parents or siblings’ children; attachments outside family and, of course, any assertion of sexuality were tabooed.*³⁰

One mid-nineteenth-century British sociologist described their lives as “wretched and deteriorating, their minds narrowing, and their hearts withering.”³¹ This is the situation and prospect of Wood’s female protagonist.

During the 1920s and 1930s a new, sexually liberated spinster-type emerged in cosmopolitan centers, later personified most famously by the author Muriel Spark’s character Miss Jean Brodie. Willing to give up marriage and a family, Miss Brodie, a postwar New Woman, is unwilling to relinquish her sexual appetite. She spends her



- 5 Grant Wood, *Victorian Survival*, 1931. Oil on composition board, 32 ½ × 26 ¼ in. Dubuque Museum of Art, on long-term loan from the Carnegie-Stout Public Library, acquired through the Lull Art Fund, LTL.99.09. © Figge Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

weekends “working it off” with a fellow teacher.³² While there is no reason to think every spinster experienced strong sexual urges, there is internal evidence the one depicted by Wood—still in *her* prime—did. Among the neglected issues in the painting is the question of hair, which has historically been a potent sexual signifier for women and men. For both Judeo-Christian and Muslim women hair has been the most important public sign of their sexuality, of their sexual power to be precise, which explains why these patriarchal cultures have insisted on keeping it under control—either covered, neatly piled, or pulled back. In one of his letters to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul said women should cover their hair “because of the angels,” which, according to one biblical historian, meant that “women must cover their heads, not because they are so weak, but because they are so powerful. As long as one woman is left alive” with unbound and uncovered hair, “no angel is safe.”³³ During the Victorian era, societal rules governing how a woman wore her hair intensified. Although girls could display long hair until adolescence, even they were expected to keep it neat and orderly. For a woman, letting her hair down could occur only in intimate personal circumstances. Equating looseness of hair with unbridled libidinal drives, the Victorians forbade it.³⁴

That Wood understood the semiotics of the Victorian hair code is indicated by his handling of the issue in *Victorian Survival* and by his instructions to his sister, while modeling for *American Gothic*, “to slick down [her] hair and part it in the middle.” But if having her hair under control suggests a woman’s grip on her libido, what are viewers to make of the single curl that escapes this cultural regime and snakes down her neck in *American Gothic*? In his 1941 letter to Sudduth, Wood provocatively said, “I let the lock of hair escape to show she was, after all, human.”³⁵ That Wood understood the full implications of this remark is suggested by the cameo, which he had just used to private effect in the portrait of his mother. Here it is associated only with the daughter, and Wood puts other facets of Persephone’s identity into play for the viewer. The goddess is known for her loose, unkempt tresses, as is evident in the cameo. In Wood’s handling of hair in *American Gothic*—which is sharper and clearer than in *Woman with Plants*—its wild, untamed nature is conveyed by an irregular outline. As in the cameo of the goddess, in this depiction the spinster has a single lock curling down to brush *her* neck. Through this mirroring, I believe Wood meant subtly to convey the woman’s repressed desire to “let her hair down,” to invoke that time-worn phrase and all it suggests about her unfulfilled desires to more fully enjoy herself—to have some fun, sexual or otherwise—like the classical nymphs and goddesses portrayed on such brooches.

Unlike Brodie, who lives in a liberal modern city where she is free to pursue her natural inclinations, Wood’s spinster lives in small-town Iowa where conservative religious attitudes, embodied by her father, prevail. Both Wood and his sister insisted the father is devoutly religious, possibly a full-time or occasional preacher in the little church behind them. This is suggested in the work, first by the quasi-religious nature of his house. Furthermore, his pitchfork tines are echoed in the unnaturally sharp steeple of that church, more firmly identifying him with organized religion. That the shape of the pitchfork is repeated in his overalls, rather than a humorous touch as many have suggested, subtly indicates that both aspects of its nature, fearsome and religious, are deeply ingrained in *his* very fabric, rendering him the perfect defender of conservative moral orthodoxy.

The art historian Thomas Hoving, in his book on the painting, perceptively notes the oddity of the pitchfork. That “it seems too thin to be a working farm tool” with “no sign of rust or blemish” leads him to conclude it “was never intended to be real, only . . . some kind of symbol.”³⁶ Because of its traditional associations with the Devil

and his domain, the pitchfork symbolically reminds the informed viewer of the most important aspect of the Persephone story, namely, that she was condemned to spend half of every year in Hades. Wood's spinster has to spend the entire year in her particular hell, with no possibility of reprieve. The hopelessness of her situation is underscored in two ways. First, by the father's tight grip on the pitchfork, which he holds, according to the well-known American essayist Guy Davenport, "as assertively as a minuteman's rifle."³⁷ Hoving adds that the hand is both slightly enlarged and painted with greater detail than the man's face. Situated at the threshold of the work, it dominates visually, and is perhaps "a symbol of his dominance." Hoving concludes that the fist "is vital to the force of the image. Without it, the . . . tremendous energy of the painting would be seriously impaired."³⁸ More than a simple one-to-one sign, the fist is best understood as a synecdoche, the part that represents the whole, given the implement it grasps, figuring both the nature of his power and her powerlessness—a demonstration of the grip he has on *her* libido as well as his own. That the woman's situation will not change is also indicated by Wood's formal handling. As Corn observes, "the static composition and immaculate forms . . . express a life of rigid routines and unchanging patterns."³⁹ What one sees on the daughter's face, I think, is her dawning recognition of her situation under the unrelenting rule of her father's iron-fisted conservatism. She will not be able to answer any of her inward pleas and will eventually become just as "dried up, dreary and drab" as Wood's original model or the subject of *Victorian Survival*. That Wood conceived *Victorian Survival* the year after *American Gothic* is probably no coincidence but the logical outcome of issues raised in the earlier work, a kind of coda, a pictorial exclamation point on the cost of adhering to small-town Midwestern religious values.

The aggressive piety of *American Gothic*'s male protagonist was clearly seen by the painting's initial enthusiasts. The popular Midwestern columnist Christopher Morley, for example, stated that "the man's somber eyes, tight lips, and the knuckled hand on the pitchfork, remind one of [the Puritan leader] Oliver Cromwell."⁴⁰ The critic for *The Boston Herald*, Walter Prichard Eaton, noted the man looked "like a revival preacher, as perhaps he is on Sundays. . . . His eyes pierce you with a fanatical stare." More important, Eaton understood that Wood's painting resonated with the cultural discourse identified with Lewis. Eaton believed "Lewis ought surely to purchase [*American Gothic*] out of his [recently awarded] Nobel prize money."⁴¹

The Cultural Context, the Personal Circumstances

To fully appreciate *American Gothic*'s contribution to the ethos of Mencken, Lewis, and their intellectual confederates, we need a fuller understanding of its origins and development in the blossoming of American bohemianism in the early decades of the twentieth century. As Christine Stansell states in her history of American involvement with the phenomenon, which arose in Paris in the nineteenth century, "bohemia in the United States was more likely to denote a gathering of ribald gentlemen . . . than a group of artists in revolt."⁴² Around 1900, however, as part of a widespread dissatisfaction with the narrowness of American culture, disaffected young men and women began gathering in various American cities, lured by the *Vie-de-Bohème* idea of a cosmopolitan life dedicated to art and freedom from bourgeois moral restraints. Bohemian enclaves emerged in New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, Chicago, and even some smaller cities, such as Davenport, Iowa.⁴³ After his return from Europe in 1926, Wood considered the gathering of his circle of friends at his Cedar Rapids studio one such community. According to Turner, a participant, Wood called it "the only truly Bohemian atmosphere west of Hoboken."⁴⁴ The

flippant remark reflects not only his commitment to bohemianism during the 1920s and his sense of humor, but also his understanding that by the mid-1920s most of the bohemian pioneers had either abandoned their original outposts for Greenwich Village, like those from Davenport, or settled down in what had become essentially artistic centers, such as Provincetown, Taos, and Woodstock.

Greenwich Village became the bohemian mecca in the years just prior to and after World War I. It was not simply *a* place to escape the strictures and values of ordinary, mainstream American life, but *the* geographical site for those committed to reforming it as well, the men and women interested in making American life both more just and individually satisfying. The vehicle for such hopes was the distinctive cultural institution developed by Villagers in the early teens: informal gathering sites—the most famous being The Liberal Club and Mabel Dodge Sterne’s Wednesday night salon—where artists, writers, and intellectuals regularly met to discuss and thus promote a wide array of new ideas and liberal initiatives. According to Stansell, “Lack of cohesion was the fundamental principle” of discussion at these gatherings, “random items and topics from the vast range of American life assembled with tonic excitement.”⁴⁵

A central subject at these gatherings was feminism, a term that came into wide use in about 1910. Emerging from the “suffragette” struggle of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that had finally secured women the vote in the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, the feminist movement was devoted to the prospect of female liberation on all fronts: political, economic, social, and sexual—all of which were implied under the rubric of the New Woman. The most controversial facet of this struggle was the campaign for birth control that began in 1912 under the leadership of a group of what Stansell calls “charismatic Village celebrities”: the anarchist Emma Goldman, the feminist labor leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and, most famously, Margaret Sanger, who opened the first birth-control clinic in the United States.⁴⁶

Implicit in this effort was the radical idea that women, as well as men, enjoyed sex. The Victorians had insisted women were essentially indifferent to it. While men craved sex, women, it was believed, craved only marriage and the children it could produce. The widely read British physician William Acton, for example, declared in 1857 that “the majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. . . . Love of home, of children, and of domestic duties, are the only passions they feel.”⁴⁷ Or, as one American writer put it in 1876: most women “are innocent of the faintest ray of sexual pleasure.”⁴⁸ The notion was first challenged in the late nineteenth century by a number of family-advice specialists, including, most importantly, the British sexologist Havelock Ellis, whose six-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897–1910) enjoyed a wide American readership.⁴⁹

The ideas of Ellis and others were the prelude to the fascination with Freudianism, or “the new psychology,” that swept America in the second and third decades of the century. Prior to his lecture at Clark University in 1909, the psychologist Sigmund Freud was little known in the United States. In 1913 the first English translations of his work began to appear. In 1915, *Everybody’s Magazine* published the first of the countless popular introductions to his ideas. According to the historian Frederick J. Hoffman, the two-part essay by the Village resident Max Eastman “did for the general public what reviewers and special writers for the *Nation* and *New Republic* were doing for the educated layman, what the men and women of Greenwich Village and of Mabel Dodge Sterne’s ‘circle’ were doing for the intellectuals and artists.”⁵⁰ Because few people actually read Freud’s essays, the subtlety and complexity of his ideas were smoothed over in both popular journals and after-dinner conversations where breadth, not depth, of topic was the order of the day. Most important, what the general public and the bohemians alike

came away with was the idea that the sexual impulse, in both men and women, was an insistent, unconscious force that *demand*ed expression. While much of the country found Freud's claim controversial, if not dangerous, Greenwich Village bohemians embraced it, not simply because it suited their own sexual mores but because it also proved a powerful tool in their larger battle against the American status quo. In search of the cultural force responsible for the sorry state of American culture, bohemians and their sympathizers decided it was Puritanism, or what Mencken in his initial treatment of the subject in 1914 called "the New Puritanism." Led by Mencken and the literary critic and historian Van Wyck Brooks, American writers and critics over the next two decades produced what one historian called a veritable "anti-Puritan crusade."⁵¹ Although Mencken considered the Puritan heritage responsible for both of the leading failings of American life—its Philistinism and its intolerant, joyless moralism—for most writers on the subject, Puritanism came only to signify the latter. Freud's principal contribution to this campaign was the concept of repression, the process by which unacceptable desires or impulses are excluded from consciousness and left to operate in the unconscious, often with undesirable results. For bohemians and their supporters, repression became the national illness, the neurosis of an entire people unable to express or pursue natural, healthy instincts for joy and pleasure, particularly sexual.⁵²

The campaign against repression and inhibition, while implicit in the visual arts of the period, was central to the writing produced by those coming out of bohemia, particularly on the subject of the small-town spinster. Until World War II the spinster was a ubiquitous figure in English-language literature. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries she was almost always a physically and spiritually diminished marginal character observed from above, a pitiable "old maid" who, for rarely named reasons, had been unable to fulfill her social and biological functions by marrying and having children. Variations on the stereotype were still to be found in the writing with which Wood was familiar. A "colorless, spinster daughter," for example, lethargically cares for her widowed father in Sigmund's "First Premium," one of the short stories collected in his *Wapsipinicon Tales*. In Lewis's *Arrowsmith*, the "typhoid Mary" of the novel is a more estimable though hardly less pathetic version of the type. Identified only as a seamstress, she is described as "a gentle, shabby, bright-eyed spinster who brought presents to the babies, helped the over-worked farmwives to cook dinner, and sang to the children in her thin sparrow voice."⁵³

As a result of the feminist movement and the new psychology, however, the spinster also became a central character in much of the writing of the period, a tragic figure with whom the reader empathizes because of what she must or chooses to forgo. In Suckow's short story "The Best of the Lot," for example, it is a question of choice. The story concerns Jennie, the eldest child of dysfunctional parents, torn between her desire to fulfill herself by going to teacher's college and her sense of duty to remain at home to care for her family. Eventually deciding on the latter course, she slowly deteriorates: "how thin she got, how tired and careworn and ageing The beautiful, shy, childlike eagerness had faded out of her eyes. Her strength was drained. There was a lifelessness about her. . . . She was not the same Jennie who had worked and studied so fiercely, day and night, for that single year at the Academy." Following the death of her parents and the scattering of her siblings, she has become a recluse, merely the sad subject of head-shaking speculation for the town's doctor. It is a cautionary feminist tale, a lesson to modern women not to follow Jennie's example.⁵⁴

In Suckow's story there is no hint of sexuality, no suggestion that Jennie forfeited more than her career. The new understanding of female sexuality is better reflected in the work of those writers interested in imaginatively examining the consequences of the sacrifice *required* of all spinsters living under the repressive "Puritan" code: her sex life. Eugene

O'Neill's two-act play *Diff'rent* (1920), for example, is the story of a repressed middle-aged New England spinster—"sex-starved," according to the New York poster for the play—who, having foolishly broken her engagement to a sailor early in her life, suddenly awakens to her pent-up needs and aggressively pursues the physical affection of a young man intent on taking financial advantage of her. Driven by despair, she commits suicide.⁵⁵

Equally dramatic fates are depicted in the work of the writer most identified with the subject, Sherwood Anderson. In "Adventure" (1919), the heroine Alice Hindman—unable to understand "the growing modern idea of a woman's owning herself and giving and taking for her own ends"—has remained loyal to the young man with whom she had an affair when she was sixteen. He had left their small Ohio town years earlier to pursue a career in Cleveland with the promise he would return for her.

During the early fall of her twenty-seventh year a passionate restlessness took possession of Alice . . . She wanted to be loved, to have something answer the call that was growing louder and louder within her. And then one night when it rained Alice had an adventure. [Which] frightened and confused her. . . . As she stood on the little grass plot before the house and felt the cold rain on her body a mad desire to run naked through the streets took possession of her.

Returning to bed after her "adventure," "she buried her face in the pillow and wept broken-heartedly."⁵⁶

Another of Anderson's short stories, "The New Englander" (1919), also ends with the sexually frustrated heroine in a wild, uncontrollable fit of weeping. Born and raised on a Vermont farm, Elsie Leander had moved to the middle of an Iowa cornfield with her barely communicative elderly parents—which, like their origins, was meant to suggest they were typical Puritan stock.⁵⁷ Increasingly possessed by the feeling "she wanted something and did not know what it was," on a walk through the cornfield one Sunday afternoon she came upon the family hired hand with his girlfriend.

They stopped near Elsie and the man took the girl into his arms. At the sound of their approach, Elsie had thrown herself face downward on the ground and had twisted herself into a position where she could see without being seen. When their lips met, her tense hands grasped one of the corn stalks. Her lips pressed themselves into the dust. When they had gone on their way, she raised her head. A dusty powder covered her lips.

After they had gone she remained on the ground:

The storm that had been threatening broke with a roar. Broad sheets of water swept over the corn fields. Sheets of water swept over the woman's body. The storm that had for years been gathering in her also broke. Sobs arose out of her throat. She abandoned herself to a storm of grief that was only partially grief.

The story ends with her on the ground listening to the "thin voices of her mother and father calling to her."⁵⁸

American Gothic is best understood in relation to such stories. As Corn was the first to observe, Wood's turn to Iowa subject matter was not prompted by developments in contemporary visual art but by the example and encouragement of regional writers, particularly Sigmund and Suckow. Corn's conclusion is now accepted among Wood's scholars. In the catalog of the Wood retrospective at the Whitney, Corn's argument is repeated by Haskell and fleshed out in the opening pages of the essay by the writer and critic Eric Banks, "Like A Book: Grant Wood's Literary Associations."⁵⁹ My analysis of *American*

Gothic shows that by taking up the spinster theme, Wood was indeed following the lead of Sigmund and Suckow, as he no doubt well understood, but his handling diverted fundamentally from theirs and others in the regional school to which they belonged, centered, as Banks notes, around the literary journal *The Midland* (founded in 1915 in Iowa City). Because of their own conservatism and a respect for that of their readers, the editors at *Midland* discouraged their contributors from participating in the new national fascination with sex.⁶⁰ They were also not interested in the critical approach to Midwestern life characteristic of the literature emerging from the East. Wood's treatment of the spinster theme aligns his work not with the regionalists but with that of O'Neill and Anderson. It is, in fact, the perfect visual counterpart to their work. While they focused on the tragic results of repression, Wood depicted its enactment, the Puritanical forces gripping its female victims. As Morley and Eaton recognized, the man in the painting is the very embodiment of the era's idea of the Puritan patriarch as characterized by an historian of the period: "a stern, austere figure whose body was so carefully guarded against exposure that it is difficult to imagine by what means he succeeded in reproducing his kind."⁶¹ In short, Wood's painting was his contribution to the anti-Puritan postwar discourse emerging from bohemian New York.

Comparisons between Wood's spinster and those in the stories by O'Neill and Anderson also raise the question of how the story of Wood's heroine might end. Although *Victorian Survival* offers the obvious answer, the tautly held anxiety on her face can be read as a sign of the same "passionate restlessness" that "was growing louder and louder" in Alice and Elsie before taking possession of them. It is not hard, therefore, to imagine Wood's spinster one day running naked through town or lying face down in a nearby cornfield, crying inconsolably.

Finally, we need to ask why Wood was interested in the plight of his female character. Although no explanation beyond a generous nature is required, the recent writing on the artist suggests he might have had deeply personal reasons, as well, and he may have been more empathetic than sympathetic. As the political scientist John E. Seery was the first to observe, Wood was the male spinster in his own family at the time of the painting.⁶² And his situation mirrored in reverse that of his heroine. Just as she was charged with the care of her widowed father, Wood was responsible for that of his widowed mother. More importantly, he, too, may have been sexually repressed. Wood's sexuality has long been in question. Homosexuality was one of the charges against Wood and his biographer, Park Rinard, used by Wood's department chair in his unsuccessful campaign to get him fired from the University of Iowa in 1940, although nothing was ever proved.⁶³ Until recently most writers have simply left the question open. During the past decade, however, more and more observers have concluded Wood was gay, or more ambiguously, "queer," as recently argued by Richard Meyer.⁶⁴ The possibility the spinster was either consciously or unconsciously an alter ego for the artist is supported by the ample evidence the painting was a kind of family portrait. The art historians Sue Taylor and R. Tripp Evans have recently and persuasively argued that the patriarch in the painting was inspired by Wood's father, Maryville. Most tellingly, Evans discovered Wood replaced the octagonal glasses worn by the dentist who modeled for the father with Maryville's own round, wire-rimmed frames, the sole personal article of his father in the artist's possession.⁶⁵ As noted above, the model for the woman was the artist's sister and the clothing and accessories belonged to their mother. While the figure of the spinster clearly reminded Wood of both his mother and sister, he was the only unmarried member of the family and the one most likely to have been sexually repressed. I find it difficult to imagine Wood would not have unconsciously, at least, identified with his character, a fellow victim of conservative morality.

Conclusions

Although the question of the spinster's personal significance for Wood is ultimately indeterminable, the story told in *American Gothic* and its cultural resonance are not. Following a series of celebratory Iowa themes, a nineteenth-century Carpenter Gothic farmhouse inspired Wood to imagine the kind of "severely straight-laced" people who might reside there. Over several months, his conception evolved from a harsh caricature of a farm couple to a carefully constructed "story-telling" picture of a narrowly religious burgher and his sexually frustrated spinster daughter. It is a story, precisely as he stated, of the "faults and fanaticisms" of people "basically solid and good." That the work participated in the anti-Puritan crusade then being conducted by Lewis and others was clearly recognized by the work's initial critics. They failed to see, however, that Wood was attempting this less through caricature than by way of the kind of tragic spinster tale popular among bohemian writers of the period. After *Victorian Survival*, an apparent coda to *American Gothic*, Wood returned to the affirmative course established in his portraits of Turner and his mother.

This new understanding of *American Gothic* exposes its transitional character: the painting looks back as much, if not more, than forward. While the subject belongs to his Regionalist production of the 1930s, alongside that of the painter Thomas Hart Benton and others, its critical content belongs, instead, to his early phase, offering belated evidence of the commitment to the Mencken–Lewis discourse that stood *behind* his early work and trips to France. More to the point, when Wood suggested to Shirer he planned to return home and follow Lewis's example, *American Gothic* is precisely the kind of work he seems to have had in mind. That the painting became the icon of the Regionalist movement and its embrace of Midwestern life is an irony Mencken and Lewis would have savored.

Notes

I want to thank Ward Briggs, David Cowart, and Alexandra Collins Mathwig of the University of South Carolina and the anonymous reviewers for *American Art* for their invaluable help in the preparation of this manuscript. I particularly wish to thank the executive editor, Robin Veder, for her patience and professionalism.

- 1 Grant Wood to Nellie B. Sudduth, March 21, 1941. The letter is in the collection of Sudduth's niece, Marjorie Mills Vandervelde, who has permitted the Silos and Smokestacks Heritage Area of Waterloo, Iowa, to publish it on their website: campsilos.org/mod2/students/wood_letter.htm.
- 2 For an overview of the critical history of the painting before 2005, see Steven Biel, *American Gothic: A Life of America's Most Famous Painting* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 45–61. Biel's conclusion that "the question of whether (*American Gothic*) is in essence satirical, fortunately, can't ever be settled" (ibid., 61) echoes the view offered by the political scientist

John E. Seery in "Grant Wood's Political Gothic," *Theory & Event* 2, no. 1 (1998). Seery argued the painting is ultimately unstable partly because the artist was unclear not only about his intentions but also about the very identities of his principals, identifying them sometimes as husband and wife, other times as father and daughter. Seery acknowledges he finds it "vastly more interesting to leave the ambiguities of *American Gothic* intact . . . to retain the pleasures and confusions of interpretive indeterminacy (par. 22)." Seery's remarks are an obvious reference to Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1973), built on the distinction between the "text," which belongs to the reader, and the "work," which belongs to the author and reflects his or her ultimately unknowable intentions.

- 3 Barbara Haskell, "Grant Wood: Through the Past, Darkly," in *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*, ed. Haskell (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2018), 21.

- 4 Peter Schjeldahl said the painting contained a "tickling ambiguity" in "Return of the Native," *New Yorker*, March 12, 2018, 80. On the question of whether the portraits were satirical or sincere, Roberta Smith claimed "Wood acceded to both at different times," in "Grant Wood at the Whitney Both Thrills and Disappoints," *New York Times*, March 15, 2018, [nyti.ms/2Dw1VE6](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/15/arts/design/grant-wood-at-the-whitney-museum.html).
- 5 Geoffrey O'Brien, "Polymorphous Eden," *New York Review of Books*, May 10, 2018, 19.
- 6 Grant Wood quoted in Arthur Millier, "Bible Belt Booster," *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*, April 7, 1940, 16, 14. Millier's article was based on an interview with the artist and on the lecture Wood gave in Westwood, California. The article is from Scrapbook 4 of the eighteen scrapbooks assembled by Nan Wood Graham in the collection of Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa. Thirteen of these scrapbooks have been digitized and are available

- as the University of Iowa Libraries: Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection: digital.lib.uiowa.edu/islandora/object/ui%3Agrantwood (hereafter Wood Digital Collection). During the 1920s Mencken regularly made fun of the “booboisie,” a term he invented in February 1922 when he and several colleagues were discussing the paucity of terms to describe the middle class: “So we put together a list of about fifty terms, and on Feb. 15 I published it in the Baltimore *Evening Sun*. It included *boobariat*, *booberati*, *boobarian*, *boobomaniac*, *boobuli*, and *booboisie*. Only *booboisie*, which happened to be one of my contributions, caught on.” H. L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1936), 560.
- 7 Grant Wood quoted in “Wood, Hard-Bitten,” *Art Digest* 10, February 1, 1936, 18. Wood claimed he had been trained at the Art Institute to paint according to “the impressionistic school.” Irma Rene Koen, “The Art of Grant Wood,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Boston, March 26, 1932, reprinted in *Des Moines Sunday Register*, April 3, 1932, Scrapbook 1, Wood Digital Collection. *Return from Bohemia* is the title of his unfinished autobiography written in the late 1930s. Only the section on his farm years was ever completed. Although written in the first person, the manuscript was actually drafted by Wood’s young collaborator, Park Rinard. Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983), 1. The manuscript is “Return from Bohemia by Grant Wood,” 1941, Grant Wood collection, 1930–1983, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
 - 8 Wood’s exhibition of forty-seven French landscapes resulted in few sales and mediocre reviews. William L. Shirer, *20th Century Journey: A Memoir of a Life and the Times*, vol. 1, *The Start (1904–1930)* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 273.
 - 9 Shirer, *20th Century Journey*, 274–75. Shirer called it “the turning point of his life as an artist” (*ibid.*, 189).
 - 10 Corn, *Grant Wood*, 25–26.
 - 11 Haskell, “Grant Wood,” 17 and 35n22.
 - 12 John B. Turner was the original owner of the funeral home. In 1924 David moved the business into a renovated mansion, for which Wood was hired to decorate and furnish the interior. Wood was allowed to build a studio and residence in the space above the garage and live there rent-free. Corn, *Grant Wood*, 21.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 28–29, 68.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 70.
 - 15 Nan Wood Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1993), 68.
 - 16 R. Tripp Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 85–88. Wood posed the goddess with wheat sheaves and corn stalks in his allegorical painting for a Cedar Rapids realtor, *Adoration of the Home* (1921–22, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art).
 - 17 Shirer, *20th Century Journey*, 186–87. In 1901 her forty-six-year-old husband suddenly died, leaving her with four children between the ages of one and fourteen.
 - 18 Corn, *Grant Wood*, 129–30; and “An Iowa Secret,” *Art Digest*, October 1, 1933, 6.
 - 19 Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, 74; and Nan Wood Graham, “Why My Brother Painted ‘American Gothic,’” *Magazine Digest* (May 1944): 46, Scrapbook 7, Wood Digital Collection.
 - 20 Wood quoted in “An Iowa Secret,” 6; and Corn, *Grant Wood*, 129, 133.
 - 21 Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, 74.
 - 22 For the scholarship in which this apparent discrepancy has fueled the claim Wood vacillated on the identities of his characters, see Seery, “Grant Wood’s Political Gothic”; Biel, *American Gothic*, 50; and Haskell, “Grant Wood,” 21. Neither Wanda M. Corn nor I have found any other evidence that might support the idea. Corn, “Grant Wood: Uneasy Modern,” in *Grant Wood’s Studio: Birthplace of American Gothic*, ed. Jane C. Milosch (New York: Prestel, 2005), 136n34.
 - 23 Grant Wood, “He Himself Explains ‘American Gothic,’” and Nan Wood Graham quoted in E. E. Graham, “What the Woman Who Posed Says,” *Sunday Register’s Open Forum*, December 1, 1930, Scrapbook 1, Wood Digital Collection.
 - 24 “‘American Gothic’ is Explained to Grant High Pupils,” March 6, 1931, Scrapbook 1, Wood Digital Collection.
 - 25 Wood to Sudduth, March 21, 1941.
 - 26 In the lecture he delivered to the fourth annual regional conference of the American Federation of the Arts in Kansas City in 1931, entitled “The Artist of the Middle West,” Wood said one of the strongest tendencies in the new art of the region is the “story-telling picture.” “Grant Wood Explains Why He Prefers To Remain In Middle West In Talk At Kansas City,” *Cedar Rapids Sunday Gazette and Republican*, March 22, 1931, Scrapbook 1, Wood Digital Collection.
 - 27 Deborah Solomon, “Gothic American,” *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, October 28, 2010, A16.
 - 28 Corn, *Grant Wood*, 133.
 - 29 *Ibid.*, 88.
 - 30 Nina Auerbach, foreword to *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel*, ed. Laura L. Doan (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991), ix.
 - 31 W. R. Greg, “Why are Women Redundant?” (1862), in *Literary and Social Judgments* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1873), 277, cited in Auerbach, foreword to Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters*, ix.
 - 32 Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1962), 87, quoted in Judy Little, “‘Endless Different Ways’: Muriel Spark’s Re-Visions of the Spinster,” in Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters*, 25. Spark’s novel was first published as a short story in the *New Yorker* on October 6, 1961 (52); the story itself is set in 1930 Edinburgh. For more on the subject of the liberated spinster during the interwar years, see Little, “Endless Different Ways,” 21–35.
 - 33 1 Corinthians 11: 6–10. Veda Cobb-Stevens, “Speech, Gesture, and Women’s Hair in the Gospel of Luke and First Corinthians,” in *The Symbolism of Vanitas in the Arts, Literature, and Music*, ed. Liana De Girolani Cheney (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1992), 325, quoted in Galia Ofek, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 5.
 - 34 Ofek, *Representations of Hair*, 3–14. In late nineteenth-century British painting, femme fatales were usually depicted with long, loose hair, as in John W. Waterhouse’s *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896, Manchester Art Gallery). As part of their embrace of female sexuality, Pre-Raphaelites often depicted women with unbridled hair. For a parallel discussion of the sexual significance of women’s

- hair in late nineteenth-century America, see Elizabeth L. Block, "Winslow Homer and Women's Bathing Practices in *Eagle Head, Manchester, Massachusetts (High Tide)*," *American Art* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 109–10.
- 35 Wood to Sudduth, March 21, 1941.
 - 36 Thomas Hoving, *American Gothic: The Biography of Grant Wood's American Masterpiece* (New York: Chamberlain Bros., 2005), 17.
 - 37 Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 13.
 - 38 Hoving, *American Gothic*, 18, 26.
 - 39 Corn, *Grant Wood*, 133.
 - 40 Christopher Morley, "The Bowling Green," *Saturday Review of Literature*, January 17, 1931, 533, Scrapbook 1, Wood Digital Collection.
 - 41 Walter Prichard Eaton, "American Gothic," *Boston Herald*, November 14, 1930, Scrapbook 1, Wood Digital Collection.
 - 42 Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010), 13.
 - 43 Stansell, *American Moderns*, 11–39. For more on Davenport, see 46–55.
 - 44 Grant Wood quoted in Darrell Garwood, *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1944), 88, cited in Corn, *Grant Wood*, 23.
 - 45 Stansell, *American Moderns*, 74. See esp. chapter 3: "Intellectuals, Conversational Politics, and Free Speech," 73–119.
 - 46 Stansell, *American Moderns*, 227–34, quote at 235.
 - 47 William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Adult Age, and Advanced Life: Considered in Their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations*, 8th ed. (London: John Churchill, 1857; Philadelphia: P. Blackiston, Son, & Company, 1894), 208, 209, quoted in *Victorian Women*, ed. Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1981), 177–78.
 - 48 Eliza B. Duffey, *The Relations of the Sexes* (New York: M. L. Holbrook & Company, 1876), 219, quoted in John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 70.
 - 49 D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 224–25.
 - 50 Frederick J. Hoffman, *Freudianism and the Literary Mind*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1957), 52.
 - 51 Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*, rev. ed. (1949; New York: Collier Books, 1962), 355. For Van Wyck Brooks's initial contribution to this critique, *The Wine of the Puritans* (1908), see James R. Vitelli, *Van Wyck Brooks* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), 40–43.
 - 52 See Hoffman, *Twenties*, 355–69.
 - 53 Jay G. Sigmund, "First Premium," in *Wapsipinicon Tales* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Prairie Publishing Company, 1927), 47; and Sinclair Lewis, *Arrowsmith* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), 187.
 - 54 Ruth Suckow, "The Best of the Lot," *Smart Set* 69, no. 3 (November 1922): 33, 34, 36. Although closely identified with the regional writers of Iowa, Suckow began spending her winters in Greenwich Village in the late 1920s.
 - 55 Robert M. Dowling, *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2014), 222.
 - 56 Sherwood Anderson, "Adventure," in *Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio*, ed. Ray Lewis White (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1997), 92, 96–97.
 - 57 Walter B. Rideout, *Sherwood Anderson: A Writer in America*, vol. 1 (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 311.
 - 58 Sherwood Anderson, "The New Englander" (1919), in *The Sherwood Anderson Reader*, ed. Paul Rosenfeld (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 65, 68–69.
 - 59 Haskell, "Grant Wood," 16–17; and Eric Banks, "Like a Book: Grant Wood's Literary Associations," in Haskell, *Grant Wood*, 59–63.
 - 60 Milton M. Reigelman, *The Midland: A Venture in Literary Regionalism* (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1975), 60.
 - 61 Hoffman, *Twenties*, 358.
 - 62 Seery, "Grant Wood's Political Gothic" par. 19.
 - 63 Joni L. Kinsey, "Cultivating Iowa: An Introduction to Grant Wood," in Milosch, *Grant Wood's Studio*, 29.
 - 64 Richard Meyer, "Grant Wood Goes Gay," in Haskell, *Grant Wood*, 79–87; and Christopher Hommerding, "'As Gay as Any Gypsy Caravan': Grant Wood and the Queer Pastoral at the Stone City Art Colony," *Annals of Iowa* 74, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 87n3. For the suggestive testimony of Wood's wife, Sara Sherman, see Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life*, 311–12.
 - 65 Sue Taylor, "Grant Wood's Family Album," *American Art* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 53–54; and Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life*, 96.